

The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer (Part 6-the Meaning of Francis Schaeffer)

by Francis Schaeffer

Francis Schaeffer's life and ministry were marked by his radical and uncompromising stance on issues, emphasizing the importance of thinking the thoughts of God and the need for a moral foundation in society.

Scripture: Proverbs 14:12, Isaiah 55:8, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 6:12, 1 Peter 2:11

Topics: "Christian Worldview", "Moral Relativism"

Description

Michael S. Hamilton reflects on the life and impact of Francis Schaeffer, a significant figure in evangelicalism known for his strong stance on societal issues and intellectual thought. Schaeffer emphasized the importance of aligning society's laws and character with God's thoughts to achieve righteousness and justice. Despite facing criticism and being misunderstood, Schaeffer's message about the dangers of relativism and moral decay in a post-Christian world remains relevant today, especially in areas like abortion and euthanasia. His unwavering dedication to challenging the status quo and his belief in the abnormality of the world compared to God's design define his lasting legacy in evangelical Christianity.

Transcript

By the end of his life, Francis Schaeffer had come full circle. A ministry born in the ecclesiastical battles of the early twentieth century now completed its course by urging evangelicals on to another round of internecine warfare. And when all was said and done, evangelicals still did not know what to make of him. Commentators struggling to characterize him adequately have tried to attach a number of labels -- pastor, evangelist, pre-evangelist, apologist, missionary to intellectuals, guru to fundamentalists, philosopher, prophet.

There is an element of truth in all these labels; each, by itself, reduces him beyond recognition. Clearly he was evangelicalism's most important public intellectual in the 20 years before his death. Ideas were to him literally matters of life and death. History, thought Schaeffer, taught that the intellectual base on which a people build their society will determine that society's laws and character:

There is a flow to history and culture.

This flow is rooted and has its wellspring

in the thoughts of people.

His singular message was that a society cannot hope for righteousness and justice without thinking the thoughts of God from the bottom up.

Despite Schaeffer's errors of detail, some critics have recently allowed that his big picture has proven durable. The conceptual centerpiece of Schaeffer's historical view is the triumph of relativism in the modern post-Christian world:

Modern men, in the absence of absolutes, have polluted all aspects of morality, making standards completely hedonistic and relativistic.

He would not have been surprised by the advent of "postmodern" thought, which has built countless altars to relativism across the intellectual landscape. Nor would he have been surprised by the resultant moral vacuum that characterizes much contemporary academic thinking. In a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, anthropologist Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban agonized over the fact that her discipline's prime directive -- cultural relativism -- left her with no rationale for opposing rape or racial genocide in other cultures. One can almost hear Francis Schaeffer saying, "I told you so."

In particular, he appears to have been prescient on the issue of human life. In 1976 he observed that

in regard to the fetus, the courts have arbitrarily separated "aliveness" from "personhood," and if this is so, why not arbitrarily do the same with the aged? So the steps move along, and euthanasia may well become increasingly acceptable. And if so, why not keep alive the bodies of . . . persons in whom the brain wave is flat to harvest from them body parts and blood?

Schaeffer's bleak vision is now daily news. "Cadaver Jack" Kevorkian has already killed more people than Ted Bundy, but the state of Michigan cannot muster the political will to stop him. A federal court has forbidden the state of Washington to pass laws preventing doctors from killing their patients, while the University of Washington is permitted to scavenge and sell the body parts of thousands of aborted children every year.

In Francis Schaeffer's later years, he seemed to act as though the social order perhaps could be reformed from the top down, beginning with laws and proceeding toward intellectual foundations. This is almost certainly due to the fact that he was thoroughly radicalized by the merciless killing of millions of unborn children. If his later actions were inconsistent with his philosophy, they were certainly understandable. To echo pro-choice historian Garry Wills, if one really does think that abortion is the taking of innocent human life, surely Schaeffer's response makes sense.

In trying to assess the meaning of Francis Schaeffer, it is instructive to compare him to Billy Graham. Both reached the peak of their influence at about the same time, and both had an immeasurable impact on American evangelicalism. Graham in many ways represents the moderate middle of evangelicalism -- defusing controversy, wishing the best for everyone, friend of both Republicans and Democrats, slow to disturb middle-class conventions, willing to cooperate with anyone who will let him preach the gospel. As historian Grant Wacker once wrote, "When Graham spoke, middle America heard itself." It was just as natural to see Graham and the President on the fairway together as to see Graham on a platform with a Bible in his hands.

But one can no more imagine Francis Schaeffer playing golf with the rich and famous than one can imagine Mother Teresa shopping for furs in I. Magnin. If Graham represents evangelicalism's smooth center, Schaeffer represents its crushed-glass edges. Evangelicalism by its nature blurs denominational distinctions, but Schaeffer's own version of Christianity was tightly sectarian. Graham lent his name widely and welcomed allies from all corners, but Schaeffer refused all alliances. Those who were not his followers but believed in his aims he categorized as cobelligerents in the war against the secularizing and dehumanizing trajectory of modern culture. While Graham appealed to the majority in the middle, Schaeffer attacked the middle for failing to see the direction it was headed. It is no accident that his strongest impact has been among those who have a bone to pick with the middle class -- dropouts, intellectuals, and that remarkable recent phenomenon, formerly respectable citizens who have begun to perceive the American judiciary as a refuge for scoundrels.

In short, Francis Schaeffer represents that part of evangelical Christianity that has always been ill at ease with the world in which it finds itself. He once said,

In my teaching, I put a great deal of weight on the fact that we live in an abnormal world. I personally could not stand this world, if I did not understand it is abnormal -- that it is not the way God made it.

Perhaps, then, this is his most enduring legacy -- his crystalline vision of the vast difference between the world God designed and the world that is the work of our hands.

Michael S. Hamilton

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